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Early language learning in instructed contexts – Editorial introduction

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This Thematic Issue of Education Inquiry contains four articles reporting on research studies conducted in the field of early language learning (ELL) in instructed contexts. Although only a small sample of recent research, they nonetheless reflect some important contemporary issues of concern for practitioners, teacher educators, and policy makers today.

The introduction of additional languages to the school curriculum during the first few years of compulsory education (generally known as primary, elementary, or basic) has grown exponentially worldwide since the late 1980s. Indeed, during this period it has been described as “possibly the world’s biggest policy development in education” (Johnstone 2009:33). Johnstone (2009) suggests there have been three distinctive waves of development worldwide:

1. 1960s: Europe, where a number of individual initiatives arise, losing momentum by the mid-1970s
2. 1990s: many countries across the world; in Europe the trend was strongly supported by the European Commission and the Council of Europe
3. 2000s: Asia, including such countries as China, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, and India

The shift towards introducing additional languages earlier in schools has been accompanied by concerns that regional and/or minority languages should form part of the primary curriculum, where applicable, in addition to the inclusion of second or foreign languages – hence the use of the term “additional languages” to describe the breadth of language choices now introduced at the primary school level across various contexts. In just a few instances (e.g. Nordic countries) children may also have a statutory right to studying their home language (or “mother tongue”) at school.

Much recent research has concentrated on the exact age at which additional languages should be introduced. This issue continues to be a contested area, with some
studies concluding that a later start may be more effective (e.g. Cenoz 2003; Muñoz 2006). However, in a more recent study, Muñoz and Singleton (2011, 11) suggest that “it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the effects observed may result from the interplay of a range of variables (including age of acquisition) rather than the decline of any specific faculty.” Research is now tending to move away from the “age” question towards investigating the nature of variables and their impact on the learning process. Despite such contested research evidence, however, the age at which additional languages are introduced into the school curriculum continues to be lowered, quite often as a result of parental demand or political will. Although this pattern cannot be said to be widespread, recently there have been one or two instances of national policy decisions in support of introduction during the preschool (kindergarten) years, which may be indicative of a developing trend. Notably, this has occurred in a number of autonomous regions of Spain, responding to concerns that all children should speak both the regional language and standard Spanish. Poland also now has plans to introduce English starting at age 3 in 2017 (Rokita-Jaśkow 2015).

The challenge for schools, with the introduction of ELL, has overwhelmingly been the availability of appropriately qualified language teachers. This challenge is even more evident at the preschool phase of education. Rapid changes in policy have not always been accompanied by the equally rapid development of suitable pre- and in-service teacher education courses. Consequently, language teachers trained to teach much older children (12–18 years) have often been employed, sometimes resulting in inappropriate approaches to classroom teaching and learning and unsatisfactory progress in ELL. In a recent study on approaches to ELL assessment, Rixon (2016, 21) commented that it was unreasonable to expect age-appropriate approaches for the assessment of young learners to be fully developed while the policy implementation process was still under development. With the limited investment in training and resources currently evident in many contexts, it appears that the phasing in of reform is likely still to take some time before achieving the anticipated outcomes.

Given the quite recent emergence of ELL as a fully fledged area of the primary curriculum, the body of empirical research that might inform and contribute to refining current practice is still developing. A number of publications can now be accessed to gain an overview of current knowledge, including the following: Edelenbos, Johnstone, and Kubanek (2007), Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2011), Butler (2015), Murphy (2014), and Murphy and Evagalogou (2016). Further research articles can be found in peer-reviewed journals and quite a few edited collections of research papers are now available from well-established publishers in the fields of both applied linguistics and education studies. There remains, however, much work to be done, particularly in recently emerging areas such as minority languages and newly arrived migrant children’s language issues (Szpotowicz 2012).
The four articles in this Thematic Issue cover some of the key topics relevant to ELL today, moving from concerns relating to age-appropriate pedagogies, through a focus on grammatical development in a regional language, to a critical examination of the quality of teaching materials, concluding with a study of identity-formation among preschool migrant children.

The introductory paper by Becker and Roos begins by suggesting that most language learning with young children in Europe focuses on oral language, including many routinized reproduction tasks that offer little opportunity for spontaneous creative language to emerge. They argue strongly for the need to move beyond the use of prefabricated constructions, towards more authentic communication – “using the target language creatively.” To achieve this they propose using improvisation activities as a solution, suggesting that in this kind of communication it is more likely that the focus will be on meaning-making rather than accuracy. The routinized practice of prefabricated sentences has its roots in an approach to language teaching and learning known as the “grammar translation method,” whereby focus is placed on learning grammar constructions through the repeated practice of full sentences, which are claimed to illustrate how the grammatical feature works in real contexts. Such methods are essentially an adaptation of approaches to teaching languages to adults, which may not always be appropriate for teaching young children. In their paper Becker and Roos offer a clear example of how pair work can provide opportunities for peers to continuously scaffold one another’s learning (Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976), co-constructing new meanings in a free and supportive environment. Their detailed account illustrates how careful attention to task design in course-book materials can provide opportunities for stimulating increased patterns in the use of creative language among children aged 8–10 years. Significantly, Becker and Roos report on the use of a flip-cam (a mini-video recording device that can be easily used by children in the classroom) for capturing evidence of oral interactions. They demonstrate how this simple mechanism can be used to routinely collect evidence of peer-initiated oral interactions, providing a cumulative record of progress in language learning that may be added to a personal portfolio. Given the time limitations available in ordinary classrooms for any kind of assessment of oral language production, this device offers great potential, yet is currently much underused.

In the second paper, Almgren and Manterola introduce us to the Basque region, stretching across the borders of France and Spain, where language issues have long been a central tenet of political dispute. In their focus on the Navarre region of Spain they describe a context in which the Basque language has undergone a process of revitalization over the past 40 years or so, moving from a language without official status or a standardized written form to gaining official status in 1982. Current provision in schools varies across the region, ranging from contexts where Basque tends only to be taught in private schools, contexts with Basque language lessons provided three to four times per week, to schools in the more northerly region of
Navarre where Basque may be the medium of instruction for the whole curriculum. Drawing their evidence for oral language development from tasks related to oral storytelling, they compare the production of one group of children at 3-year intervals as they move through the school (aged 5/6 years, aged 8, and aged 11 years). According to Cameron (2001), storytelling offers a natural way to introduce children to continuous and coherent spoken discourse, thereby contributing to the development of their language skills. As the authors remind us at the outset, research has indicated that the second language (L2) does not always develop as efficiently as the first language (L1). In the hope of providing further information on the process of bilingual development they have therefore focused on the types of lexical difficulties that are experienced at three points in the learning process for these children. Their findings seem to indicate that there may be different developmental patterns for various aspects of L2 development, with the acquisition of temporal text organizing features clearly needing more explicit teaching than some lexical items. More detailed studies of this type are needed to offer further insights to teachers engaged in the process of identifying effective ways of providing appropriate scaffolding for oral language production at each stage of children’s learning.

The third paper of this collection, authored by Norlund, returns to the question of teaching materials, this time presenting a critical study of two course book series used in the Swedish context. As Norlund notes, in many contexts teachers are heavily reliant on the course book (Ghosn 2003), sometimes because the curriculum requires precise coverage of specific vocabulary. More often this reliance occurs in ELL contexts when teachers feel insecure about either their language or their pedagogical competencies, or possibly for both reasons. In this study Norlund discusses the important lexical choices to be made by course-book authors, noting how frequently vocabulary needs to be recycled across a range of task types for it to be fully internalized and acquired by the learner. In her analysis of vocabulary included in the two course-book series studied she draws attention to the inclusion of high frequency words such as “witch, dragon and pirate,” referring to a list of 2000 frequently used words in English known as the “General Service List of English words” (GSL), published by West (1953). She also questions whether the top 200 key words included in the Oxford Children’s Corpus (Wild, Kilgarriff, and Tugwell 2013) are likely to be of more general use in later life. In problematizing the lexical choices made by course-book authors and revealing the limited recycling opportunities offered by tasks, Norlund demonstrates how complex the process of materials development can be and hints that publishers’ market concerns may also have an impact on the conservative nature of some content. Norlund concludes by noting that Swedish learners may well internalize language from contexts outside of the school environment, given the wide level of societal exposure available in Scandinavia. It is also possible that skilled teachers may choose to recycle vocabulary more frequently than the course-book suggests and thus will overcome the negative effects of limited exposure.
In the final paper of this collection Ibrahim reports on a study of nine children (preschool and primary school) living in Paris and attending a school with a bilingual French/English profile, with a third heritage language. Her study followed them as they developed their multilingual identities, which she proposes were learned within a social context and were in some senses fixed yet in other senses dynamic. She carefully documents their trilingual identities, drawing her data from interviews with parents and children, focus group interviews with teachers, evidence from children’s writing and drawings, and artefacts brought by the children as representative symbols of their cultural identities. The data are categorized in terms of “person, place and experience.” For example, the children were very clear about which language they spoke with each member of their social network (immediate family, school friends, etc.). Her data clearly illustrate how these children “create identity links” to particular cultures, yet also “create hybrid and transnational spaces” that allow them freedom to slide between identities as circumstances require. Her detailed case study, multi-method approach provides rich illustrations of how this process emerges in the lives of these young multilinguals. Her image of an “identity skin” that children take off or put on, as circumstances require, is vivid in its illustration of how children manage their multiple cultural identities. Significantly, she aims to let the children’s voices be heard as they articulate the complexities of their own identities. In the conclusion she notes how children’s narratives are positively supported by parents, contributing to the development of their self-esteem and ability to successfully negotiate what she describes as “21st century hybrid living.” Without doubt, this study deserves replication across many contexts in Europe today that are currently experiencing the rapid expansion of migrant communities and the consequent need to support families and children in adjusting to a new learning context, where the advantages of nurturing multilingual identities may not yet be fully appreciated.

In this Thematic Issue we have introduced just a handful of the issues that currently concern educators connected with the field of ELL. Much further research is needed in relation to age-appropriate pedagogies, materials design, and language and identity development. Missing from this collection are papers on policy development and teacher education provision – two areas much in need of greater understanding. Under the auspices of the recently established ELL Research Network (a special interest group established with the support of the International Association of Applied Linguistics [AILA]), it is expected that further research in these areas will contribute to a deeper understanding of the issues to be addressed.

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Note

1 For details, see www.ell-ren.org.
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